

TESTIMONY OF DERRICK C. EVANS

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Chairman Turner, Ranking Member Clay and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss “Historic Preservation vs. Katrina and Rita: What role should Federal, State, and Local Governments Play in Preservation of Historic Properties Affected by These Catastrophic Storms?”

My name is Derrick Christopher Evans. I am an historian and a sixth generation descendant of the African American men and women who settled coastal Mississippi’s historic Turkey Creek community in 1866 – *Year One* of Black Freedom in the aftermath of Slavery and Civil War. As a child in the 1970s, I also logged many wonder-filled miles in the modified mail truck that my grandfather drove as a vendor of snack foods to black owned restaurants, stores and clubs throughout the larger gulf coast area. Raised on oral history and a proud sense of community, the universal importance of culture and heritage have continued to shape virtually every aspect of my personal and professional development, and I am exceedingly grateful. Hoping to preserve this possibility for others, I appear before you today as the Founder and Executive Director of Turkey Creek Community Initiatives (TCCI) – a local 501©3 organization engaged in the comprehensive revitalization of Gulfport, Mississippi’s historic, low-income and profoundly endangered Turkey Creek community and watershed.

Founded in October 2003, TCCI’s mission is to *conserve, restore and utilize for education and other socially beneficial purposes the unique cultural, historical and ecological assets* of this remarkable little community, coastal creek and urban watershed. Preserving the community’s architectural heritage has, from day one, been a core component of my organization’s broader push to stabilize and promote the community’s residential, historical and environmental integrity. To fulfill these goals, we have partnered with teachers, churches, scholars, lawyers, conservationists, historic preservationists, government agencies, and *smart growth* advocates from across Mississippi and the United States. Today, we share with this subcommittee and others the critically important goal of saving as many historic properties as possible in the Gulf Coast region, so as to retain cultural memory, continuity of culture and a sense of place in this devastated area of our state and nation.

As some gathered here have witnessed, recent articles in the NY Times and LA Times etc. have sparked unprecedented awareness and support for Turkey Creek nationwide – and we are truly grateful. When the MS Dept of Archives and History recently revisited our community with structural engineers and architectural historians representing FEMA and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, we began to sense that a tide was turning in our long and difficult struggle for protection as an historic community. We were further encouraged when MDAAH subsequently deemed the entire community eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, and when the National Trust thereafter presented \$10,000 to the neighborhood’s Homeowners Association for emergency shoring of Katrina-damaged historic structures. Notwithstanding these

clear signs of progress, I remain deeply concerned about the even greater challenges that lie before us all in turning Turkey Creek's dream of restoration and recognition into a reality. In a nutshell, a host of obstacles including poverty, communication, municipal planning issues, and the traditional non-involvement of poor people and blacks in heritage preservation will continue to plague us if not thoroughly discussed and dealt with. This is true to an even greater extent in the equally marginalized city, state and regional communities that have not been quite the "squeaky wheel" that Turkey Creek has.

Across the region, the basic fact pattern is that race, class and segregation "placed" Negro homes and communities north of the beachfront as well as north of the train tracks that worked like a protective levee during not only Katrina, but Camille and other previous storms. Largely for this reason, much of what's left of our city and region's heritage resources lie in places that have long been overlooked for holding such value. For these dozens of communities that have been – for whatever reasons - excluded from decades of deliberate and proactive heritage planning, the challenge of securing financial, labor and material resources to salvage our shared resource pool is daunting to say the least. In very many cases, the task will require assisting low income owners of potential heritage structures to bring their buildings up to code while also meeting the Interior Secretary's standards for historical recognition. My earnest hope is that what was not a priority before Hurricane Katrina will become one now. Our failure in this regard will only engender a massive, avoidable and additional loss of collective American heritage in the wake of a storm that has harmed us enough already.

Frankly, we need to expand and shift at every level what we mean by coastal heritage and historic preservation. Let me offer an example. On December 8, 2004, the President signed into law the Congressional Act which designated the six coastal counties of my state the "Mississippi Gulf Coast National Heritage Area." In Section 2 of that enabling legislation, Congress found that "the area is rich with diverse cultural and historical significance, including-- (A) early Native American settlements; and (B) Spanish, French, and English settlements originating in the 1600s." NOWHERE in the legislation – or in most subsequent public discourse - was there any reference to African-Americans or to the region's more recent immigrants from Vietnam. As most of you would probably agree, the omission of African-Americans is particularly striking given that we're talking about *Mississippi* as well as an area located in a reknown cultural corridor that includes New Orleans.

One contributing factor to this egregious oversight is that the pursuit of tourist dollars has been the primary force behind heritage planning on the Mississippi coast since before Katrina and, perhaps, since then. While "cultural tourism" is indeed a well-advised supplement to the casino-centric planning and development that has earned Harrison County the nickname "Playground of the South" – it is not the most important, desirable or lasting result of preserving local heritage. It is instead LIVING – how community members work, play and learn – that is most enhanced when our environment affords us the cultural continuity and connectivity that makes a place special and worth preserving. As Gulf coast residents and survivors of Katrina, our choice should not be limited to losing our heritage on one hand versus "living in a museum" on the other.

In closing, whether discussing during good times a "Heritage Area" or during bad times a "Recovery Area" – the fact remains the same: that a far more inclusive and realistic

inventory of the cultural and historical resources of the Mississippi gulf coast is in order *now*. Any Action Plan that fails to thoroughly embed this goal will have ignored the lessons learned from our near loss of Turkey Creek and will, in the end, fail to achieve the very goals and values that have brought all of us here today. Turkey Creek's ongoing struggle for community survival is not just black, southern, or environmental - but profoundly *American* and deeply *human*. As such, it is imperative that all who care make an effort to learn from the FULL story – including the central role that oversights and omissions born of ignorance and expediency consistently play in the continuing loss of coastal Mississippi's heritage resources. Thank you.